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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000921

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: POLICE SOFT-PEDALING INVESTIGATION OF
CHURCH ATTACK

REF: COLOMBO 895

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Findings from Pol FSN's May 16 visit to the site of a church attack in the southwestern district of Galle indicate an unwillingness from local authorities to prosecute the perpetrators, who include two Buddhist monks and the chairman of the village council. The pastor of the church, whose wife and parishioners were beaten in the attack, is also reluctant to pursue criminal charges, citing a fear of retaliation. Unfortunately, the dismissive attitude of local authorities and the pastor's own timidity may only encourage more attacks in the future. End summary.

COMPETING RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES FUEL CONFRONTATION

¶2. (SBU) On May 16 Pol FSN traveled to Balapitiya in the southwestern district of Galle to look into reports that parishioners at the Zion Prayer Center were assaulted by a group of about 10 men, including a local Buddhist monk and the chairman of the village council, on May 1. During his visit Pol FSN met with Priyanjith de Silva, pastor of the church; Kamal Kiriella, the Officer in Charge of the local police station; Dr. Dhammadika Wickremasekera, the doctor who treated the pastor's wife for injuries suffered in the attack; Ven. Dammiaka, a Buddhist monk reportedly involved in the attack; and Leelasena Soyza, the chairman of the village council.

¶3. (SBU) According to the account provided by the pastor, several eyewitnesses and the National Evangelical Alliance, members of the Zion Prayer Center were confronted the morning of May 1 by an angry group of men, including two Buddhist monks, the village council chairman and some other council members, who demanded that they end a prayer service then in progress. (Note: The pastor himself was not there at the time. End note.) Church members refused, and the confrontation escalated. The gang reportedly entered the church, breaking furniture and musical instruments. Three women, including the pastor's wife and a pregnant parishioner, were assaulted by the gang. The pastor's wife was reportedly pulled by the hair by one of the monks, kicked in the stomach several times and had to be hospitalized for four days.

¶4. (SBU) According to local police, a senior monk at the local temple, who was also the brother of the village council chairman, had died and been cremated the day before; the ceremony took place on the grounds of the village council. The following morning some monks and lay people went to the village council grounds, which is located about 20 feet from the Zion Prayer Center, to collect the monk's ashes. Kiriella explained that the Buddhist group was offended that the parishioners were singing and playing musical instruments during the service, which they viewed as disrespectful to Buddhists still mourning the loss of their senior cleric.

MONKS, LOCAL REPS DENY INVOLVEMENT;
POLICE SEE IT DIFFERENTLY

¶5. (SBU) Ven. Dammiaka denied to Pol FSN that any assault took place, contending instead that the pastor's wife slipped and fell while verbally abusing him and other members of his group. (Ven. Seevali, the other monk accused of participating in the assault, was out of Balapitiya on May 16 but spoke with Pol FSN by phone. He similarly denied attacking the women.) Village Council Chairman Leelasena Soyza and council member Ajith Soyza (who was also accused of participating in the attack), in a separate meeting maintained their innocence to Pol FSN as well. The chairman claimed instead that a fight had broken out among the

parishioners themselves; hence the broken furniture and bruises. Dr. Wickremasekera painted a different picture, however, indicating that he believed the parishioners' account. He told POL FSN that Mrs. de Silva's injuries were consistent with severe beating and kicking, but he added that she had not suffered any internal or permanent injuries.

16. (SBU) OIC Kiriella told POL FSN that police also believe, based upon their investigation of the incident, that the monks and village council members participated in the violent attack against the women. Citing local sensitivities, including the special position of prestige and respect generally accorded Buddhist monks, he indicated reluctance to pursue criminal charges against the perpetrators. (Note: In an earlier telephone conversation with POL FSN shortly after the incident, Kiriella hinted that he was under pressure from Buddhist Affairs Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake--who is also the Cabinet Minister in charge of police--to drop the matter. End note.) Kiriella said the police had already submitted a preliminary report on the incident to the local magistrate recommending that the matter be referred to a local mediation board. (Note: The mediation board has five members, including the local school principal, a monk from the local temple and some business people. End note.) He acknowledged that the police had not yet submitted Mrs. de Silva's medical report as evidence to the magistrate, but assured POL FSN that all appropriate records would be made available to the mediation board "when necessary." Kiriella said he expects the case to be heard by the end of the month.

PASTOR WANTS PEACE

17. (SBU) Pastor de Silva confided to POL FSN that he believes the best that he can hope for from the mediation board is some monetary compensation for his wife's injuries and a commitment that church services can continue undisrupted in the future. (Note: Mediation boards have no enforcement powers. End note.) Although technically he has the option to reject mediation and press for criminal charges against his wife's attackers--which Colombo-based evangelical groups seem to be urging him to do--he said he is loath to do so, adding "I have to live here." His life as the only Christian pastor in the vicinity will become increasingly difficult if he decides to take the battle to court, he suggested.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom noted a disinclination among local authorities to press charges against perpetrators of religious violence (Reftel); the attitude of the Balapitiya police seems to be a case in point. Although we have received sporadic reports of harassment and intimidation of Christian groups over the past year, the incident in Balapitiya is particularly egregious, both because of the uncharacteristic level of violence and because of the participation of "pillar-of-the-community" religious and political leaders. The violence and hostility reflected in this incident are unlikely to be dispelled by any settlement the board--which lacks enforcement powers--may suggest. We will continue to monitor the progress of this case.

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